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SUBJECT: NIGERIA: POLIO ERADICATION INITIATIVE AND DS/HHS
ALLEN VISIT TO NIGERIA

REF: NONE

SUMMARY

1. This cable highlights recent dialogue between USAID and other donors intended to develop and implement a new strategy to address the resurgence of wild polio virus transmission in Nigeria. Key elements of the strategy include:

- (1) A Ministerial-level declaration of commitment to end polio virus transmission, issued in Geneva on January 15, 2004;
- (2) A UNICEF Executive Board meeting in New York to address global polio eradication;
- (3) Implementation of four rounds of 2004 National Immunization Days (NIDs) in Nigeria, commencing February 23, 2004;
- (4) A renewed emphasis on routine immunization and mop-ups;
- (5) Establishment of a dedicated inter-agency working group to manage the strategy; and
- (6) Heightened commitment to the devolution of authority and responsibility for immunization to states and local government areas.

BACKGROUND

2. Nigeria is the largest remaining polio reservoir globally. As recently as mid-2003, transmission was confined to the northern portion of the country in just 8 states and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), with most of the cases occurring in Kano and Kaduna States. Since August 2003, the virus has spread from the north of Nigeria into an additional 15 previously polio-free states as well as seven neighboring countries, some of which had been polio-free for as long as two years.

3. USG support to polio eradication in Nigeria has three focal areas: 1) build the capacity of field personnel involved in the polio eradication initiative to deliver high quality immunization services; 2) contribute to advocacy and social mobilization campaigns to ensure that every child under five years of age is adequately immunized against polio; and 3) support for surveillance activities through a grant to the World Health Organization (WHO).

APPROACH

4. Interruption of viral transmission in 2004 will require an extremely well-coordinated effort. Toward that end, USAID has begun meeting with other donors to strategize on effective ways forward.

DECLARATION

5. On 8 January 2004, USAID/Nigeria Mission Director Dawn Liberi met with Dr. Jean-Marie Okwo-Bele, UNICEF Headquarters Senior Advisor and Team Leader, Polio Plus; Dr. Abdulai Tinorgah, Chief of Health and Nutrition at UNICEF/Nigeria, and USAID Mission health staff. At this meeting UNICEF advised the Mission that following a re-grouping and strategizing retreat between WHO and UNICEF, the two organizations arranged a meeting in Geneva for 15 January 2004 to bring together the Ministers of Health and

other government representatives from the six remaining most polio-endemic countries -- India, Nigeria, Afghanistan, Niger, Egypt and Pakistan -- with WHO and UNICEF headquarters representatives. The purpose of the meeting was to sign a Joint Declaration of Commitment to end poliovirus transmission by 2005.

IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGY

16. Following the Geneva meeting, the UNICEF Executive Board will convene a meeting, scheduled for the end of January 2004, to further address the issue of global polio eradication, focusing mainly on key messages to go out from the partners to endemic countries. In line with a renewed commitment to improve the flow of relevant information to all involved partners, UNICEF will debrief USAID and other partners on the outcome of both meetings.

17. A newly-devised and staffed polio eradication initiative (PEI) Working Group began operations on 15 January in Abuja to prepare for the launch, on February 23, of first of four NIDs scheduled for 2004. Sub-NIDs and mop-ups as needed are also planned. This group will serve as the central operations center for all PEI activities in Nigeria, with a similar structure to be set up in Kano soon for coordination of activities in northern Nigeria. Both operational groups will function under the leadership of UNICEF, but will also include representation from all agencies and the GON. Equal weight will be given in the scope of work for this group to provision of routine immunization services and dissemination of messages, and to the ongoing decentralization of responsibility for immunization to states and local government areas (LGAs). Nigerian Youth Service Corps (NYSC) will be trained to work in the two operations centers to assist with the mobilization of communities and to convey routine immunization and health messages other than polio to the grass roots.

NEXT STEPS

18. On 13 January 2004, a second meeting was held in the office of the USAID Mission Director, with the Nigerian UNICEF Country Representative, Dr. Gianni Murzi and USAID health staff. Dr. Murzi apprised the Mission of the latest developments and the strategic response of the UN Agencies. It was agreed that a re-structuring of both the Inter-Agency Coordinating Committee (ICC) and Core Technical Group must take place, with only Agency Heads attending the ICC (which is chaired by the Hon. Minister of Health) and taking the final decisions. The Technical Core Group can more appropriately serve as the body to prepare the issues to be sent to the ICC for decisions and/or action.

CONCLUSION

19. The USG is the largest single donor to the PEI globally. For this and myriad other reasons, we are gravely concerned about the recent events and issues arising from the north of the country. USAID fully supports the new strategy being proposed for what is hoped to be the final year of intensive PEI activities. Post has closely followed the many recent articles in both national and international press and is aware of the political issues and sensitivities involved. Because these issues frequently transcend the technical and managerial problems in Nigeria, they have been fully taken into account in the new strategy. We recognize the need to move cautiously and in complete harmony with our donor partners, and we welcome the opportunities provided us for advocacy to the top from our high-level visitors.

110. The January 15-18 visit to Nigeria of Deputy Secretary Claude Allen, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, helped raise USG concerns to President Obasanjo and the Ministry of Health. The USG will continue to advocate greater resource flows and commitment to polio eradication through donors' fora, meetings with the GON and with other partners. Deputy Secretary Allen offered to consult with HHS Secretary Tommy Thompson to secure his support for UNICEF

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to mount an international donor effort to eradicate polio in Nigeria. He suggested that UNICEF identify noted Islamic scholars and health practitioners from other Muslim countries as advocates for polio eradication in Nigeria. These scholars and health practitioners would hold discussions with their Islamic counterparts to discuss culturally sensitive ways to address the problem which has been eradicated in other Muslim

countries.
ROBERTS.